

Virtual Gaming as a Contemporary Research Trend for Mental Health Professionals

Anganabha Baruah¹

¹Amity University, Noida, India

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ABSTRACT

As technology continues to be a part of our life, online gaming has claimed the hearts of millions of people as a favourite leisure activity. Among them online role-playing game provides people the opportunity to play a desired role, be it a king, princess or warrior. This article aimed to provide an insight into what role-playing game is, and why it has become so popular in recent years, with the help of existing literature. This article also attempted to point out the need to research more in the field of gaming as the existing literature is not sufficient to cover the vastness of the topic. The digitalization of games from physical form to online form has changed the way games has been viewed, played, and understood. Due to the popularity of online games, there is a significant change in the research around online games, especially role-playing games. There is still more research needed in Indian context about online games as it has become a popular source of entertainment throughout all the ages and also become a huge source of economy.

Key Words: Online Gaming, Technology, Role Playing, Digital

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Correspondence: Dr. Anganabha Baruah (Email: withangana@yahoo.com)

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of technology and online platforms has become a central idea while discussing social behaviours such as socialization or self-management. These platforms came with genesis of computer technology in form of digital connectivity. To address the questions a relatively new field of psychology has emerged; i.e., Cyber psychology; which focusses on effect of technology on human behaviour. Technology has affected the life of people in a number of different ways and has become a basis for future connections.¹ Most of the children today are growing up with an access to various devices such as smart phone, laptop, smart television, games, consoles etc.² They are “digital natives” who are tech savvy and their lives revolve around Tik-tok, Instagram or PUBG.³

Nowadays we can see that computer technology is able to generate a 3D world that lets us experience things that are not accessible in real life or not even created; i.e., virtual world. It is an online space where we can access wonderful games, create different selves or socialize with others. Virtual world can be best understood in form of some simulation and role-playing games, where there is a persistent “metaverse” that we can access anytime. Here the focus is on avatars, which are representation of people online, which I will be discussing later. Recently there is a category of gaming called virtual reality (VR) gaming where through specialized headset, we can experience the VR world even more realistically. However, that kind of gaming is not yet very popular in India so in this research I will be focusing mainly on massive multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG) which I will explain in the next section. Within a few years virtual reality has become an integral part of life where we have uninterrupted access to various streaming websites or online games. The idea of virtual world can be most apparently seen in online role-playing games where there is a metaverse or a parallel world.

However, unlike social network, it is too generic to use the term online world to address role playing games (RPG). It is because the idea of virtual reality separates many online games like Ludo or car racing etc. from RPGs hence, I will be using the term “virtual” in this context of MMORPG gaming. Gaming has become easily accessible due to the current access of flagship smart phones which are equipped with heavy hardware to support HD graphics and uninterrupted gaming to give us full virtual stimulation. Apart from that, in order to assist undisturbed access to gaming world internet providers has come up with access to 4G technology at a very reasonable price which makes it accessible to people from all socioeconomic background. Smart devices have become a fairly common possession of almost everyone where we can always remain “logged in” into streaming websites, social networks or online games. Moreover, virtual world has neither borders nor con-

straints and can be created and manipulated by ourselves as we wish; we can enhance it by our imagination.

EXPRESSION OF SELF THROUGH ROLE-PLAY

Role-playing games offer people the chance to actively take part in their own alternate expressions of self, exploring parts of themselves that were previously submerged or repressed by the dominant culture and the requirements of daily roles. The virtual world within the game also provides an escape from these expectations temporarily. Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of role-playing games lies in the ability to shift personality characteristics within the parameters of the game environment. Moreno delineated role theory, as an idea focused upon exploring the psychosocial expectations placed on each of us to perform particular roles, a concept later embraced by Goffman. Another important related idea is the emphasis on the development of trust and relaxation in a safe atmosphere which is important in all forms of “improv”, including role-playing. Though gamers often take their participation in role-playing extremely seriously, the emotional space provided by the game format itself offers a relatively consequence-free environment.

THE IDEA OF VIRTUAL WORLD

In 21st century, one can see a complementary connection between evolving smart gadgets and super-fast networking. This harmony can be seen in form of virtual reality where HD devices as well as internet both are equally essential. Virtual world is separated from the physical world through computer screen where one can experience anything as long as the internet is running. It lacks the tactile or vestibular sensory experiences that physical world provides. Every day it becomes harder to tell where exactly the physical world ends and the virtual world begins. The online world, once used to simply gather and share information, has widened out to a place where people can meet, chat, learn and play together. Virtual environments (such as the online role-playing game “World of Warcraft”) centre on fun, fantasy and entertainment.

Even though virtual world is an emerging field which deserves much attention, there is a fragmented understanding in the literature of what a virtual world is and is not. To further complicate this problem, within the literature we find a variety of terms which are used to label the technology: virtual world (VW), virtual environment (VE), multi-user virtual environment (MUVE), simulated worlds etc. This seemingly innocuous plethora of terms has the potential to introduce confusion through conceptual misunderstanding, limiting the development of the field. In

the field of social sciences there are not many dedicated research work done on virtual world. Even the definitions from various disciplines differ. It is conceptualised the virtual as that which is opposed to actual or physical, but not opposed to real, meaning that the virtual is also real or at least our perception of it is.⁴ By far the most commonly used definition of virtual world in the current literature is Bell's: "A synchronous, persistent network of people, represented as avatars, facilitated by networked computers".⁵ Virtual is used to something that is almost real, something which is perceived to exist, but lacks physical properties beyond the screen. Any world is experienced and mediated through our bodies. Within a virtual world this is achieved through the use of an avatar the inhabitant of the virtual world which provides the user with an active agent with which to encounter the world. These avatars, their appearance and abilities, mediate our experience of the virtual world and our interactions with others. The context of virtual environment is changing the way games are played these days and how gaming has been upgraded from outdoor to online which I will be discussing in the next section.

ROLE PLAYING GAMES AND MENTAL HEALTH

There are three main categories of games; outdoor games, indoor games and the new age digital games.⁶ When I try to think about the games I used to play as a child I remember most of them as being outdoor games as badminton or tennis. Then after a while my parents gave me one digital gaming device with some arcade games which was very popular at that time. But currently even the children's game is very sophisticated and interactive, like talking tom or temple run which are very popular among kids nowadays. I can't deny that even I, as an adult occasionally engage in "talking tom" as it seems like an adorable virtual pet. Games have always been understood as an activity that enhances players' various cognitive abilities, socialization capacities or teamwork. It is generally accepted that games prepare people physically and cognitively and improve creativity, problem-solving skills and enhance the feeling of freedom.⁷ As the idea of gaming has been fundamentally transformed by technology, digital gaming became more popular than physical gaming in recent years. Unlike physical games; which requires athletic bodily features to excel; online gaming is accessible to everyone. People can choose from many alternative games which are suited to their interest. Children today are engaged in various games online at the comfort of their couch in smart devices like smart phones, tablets etc. This transition of gaming from physical sports to online playing has given birth to new forms of computer and video games. In fact, computer games are so popular that blockbuster films are being made about them (e.g., Warcraft, As-

sassin's Creed). There are various types of online games such as arcade games, first person shooter games, puzzle games, role playing games and so on. In this particular research I wish to explore one of such categories of online games known as Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG). MMORPGs are engaging millions of players in a range of varying computer, console and mobile games which span several game genres covering numerous themes. Contrary to the behaviour exhibited during the genesis of video games, MMORPGs introduce a strong social component to simple gaming. Nowadays many games include inevitable social component, demanding player's interaction and cooperation like forming squads in Player Unknown Battle-grounds (PUBG) or Fortnite. These games are some examples of MMORPGs which has managed to captivate interests of many players.

MMORPGs have amazing storyline, beautiful settings with their magic and fairies or whatever appeals to people. Overall, it is a haven for gamers with creative and bizarre imagination. MMORPG's provide players with a graphically rich, fully immersive 3D fantasy world in which like-minded users can interact and collaborate to accomplish complex tasks.⁸ These fantasy worlds inside the games are often called "virtual world" or a parallel world different from the physical world. In virtual world, gamers can choose from a set of avatars or roles that the MMORPG provides and the permanence and fluidity of roles varies depending on the design of the environment. Each role has varied strengths and weaknesses and many MMORPG environments force users to collaborate in order to achieve certain goals.⁹ However, MMORPG offer individuals the chance to explore new aspects of themselves and others through a process known as avatar creation. In daily life, we must adopt several social avatars in order to fully integrate with society, including: spouse, worker, child, parent, lover, friend, etc. While people may find fulfilment in these roles, many aspects of the psyche remain suppressed and underdeveloped as we strive to adapt to the demands of the external social world. Fantasy may provide an outlet for these elements of the psyche to find expression, establishing a venue for players to develop alternate identities or avatars in a safe, controlled space.

When looking for literature on gaming, one can find lot of work on addiction or motivation for gaming. However, the role of social and economic factors, such as family income, education, and access to technology are often less researched in gaming. As a result, possible differences in gaming behaviours by various social and economic subgroups have not been explored. Likewise, existing research has mainly focused on playing time and online social interactions.¹⁰ and has not examined the diverse sociocultural factors of gaming behaviours. It was observed that males spent more time playing than females.¹¹ It was also found that there is a positive correlation between income level and gaming behaviour because

people need resources to play games online and for that a stable income is very important.¹²

ONLINE GAMING AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

Unfortunately, most of the literature available on online gaming is concentrated around effects of gaming, especially addiction or increased aggression. Recently I went through various news articles with game addiction, game ban in some states of India, Netflix addiction etc. One of the most popular games has been labelled as a social evil only within one year since it was released in mobile platform in India. But at the same time, multiplayer games (MMO) have been used successfully as a rehabilitation tool for psychotherapy since the early 1990s. Unfortunately, they don't get a lot of publicity¹³ (Bartle, 2016). This means few psychiatrists know about the potential benefits of virtual worlds for rehabilitation or other therapy, and not the patients. Some researchers have agreed that many heavy gamers actually develop symptoms similar to the symptoms of other behavioral addictions, these include jeopardization of interpersonal and social relationships, obsession by the game, persistence in gaming patterns despite being aware of their negative consequences, experiencing of withdrawal symptoms while not able to be online, and relapsing back into heavy gaming after periods of relative control.^{14,15} Recently, the internet gaming disorder was added as an experimental diagnosis in the 5th revision of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.¹⁶ Unfortunately, most of these studies are based on male players and female gamers are vastly underrepresented in research. Although there is case study evidence suggesting clinicians are increasingly treating female gamers, but psychotherapists treating Internet Gaming Disorder indicate it may go unnoticed in females¹⁵, who also show psychopathological differences connected to their addiction compared with men.

It has also been speculated by researchers that whenever a new entertainment medium appears, our society doesn't understand it and so doesn't trust it. Sometimes, the paranoia is justified; for e.g., narcotics use. But most of the time, the initial reaction is exaggerated.¹³ In the past, society has been concerned about the effects of many books, the waltz, music halls, film, jazz, radio, comic books, TV, rock and roll, videos, rap, and the Internet. However, hopefully with the passage of time video games won't be considered as the latest threat to civilization.¹³ Indeed, it already happened with social media (such as Facebook and Twitter) at the beginning when people were very sceptical about it becoming a 'social evil'. But now it has become a part of our daily routine despite the age group. However, until that happens, the relentless narrative that video games cause players to be aggressive in real life, will continue. Researchers have looked at levels of violence in the United States at different intervals following

the release of major so called "violent" games such as Call of Duty and Grand Theft Auto.¹⁷ They found no increase in violence. Indeed, it was speculated that overall violence levels in society have gone down since video games provide a cathartic space to release pent up aggression. Another reason why violent video games are related to aggression concerns identification. If I play a character in a game for a long time, I am likely to identify with that character. Therefore, if my character is violent (because it's a violent game), then I, the player, will manifest those feelings in real life as well. It was also found that 40 percent of male MMO players play female characters. If virtual identification could change people, does that mean they're becoming more female? The answer is obviously not, which is why it is important to understand gaming in a holistic perspective going beyond the study of cause-and-effect relationships.

CONCLUSION

Gaming has become a part of our life in form of candy crush, talking tom and many others. The evolution of online gaming from a single player game to an interactive multi-player world induces the players to have the ability to control and alter the universe where they are in and via their character, they transform these games into "self-contained, three-dimensional societies". Thus, to understand the game universe as a whole. Gaming studies are still lacking in India, where the focus is mostly only from the viewpoint of addiction. However, as a major generator of our country's capital, gaming and gamers need to be studied beyond the limited scope of game addiction. As the development of our nation progresses, online gaming can prove to be a huge contributor to our economy, children education as well as a therapeutic tool. Additionally, the multi-player experience as opposed to mostly single player games which were available at the beginning of this millennium leads to interaction between avatars which may be extended as friendship/ companionship in the physical world. People can manipulate facets of their self-representations, such as facial features or head movements, to gain influence or accomplish other social goals in the virtual world.

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